

Debbie Regala

State Senator • 27th Legislative District



Dear Neighbors,

Another legislative session has begun and I am looking forward to building upon recent legislative successes. I am also honored that the Senate Democratic Caucus has again selected me to be the Majority Whip.

As most of you already know, I've never been afraid of delving into difficult issues. As a legislator, I feel a responsibility to find solutions that will not only

make our neighborhoods safer, but strengthen community partnerships. Joining with fellow legislators and others to seek solutions creates opportunities to learn and dispel misconceptions. That leads to productive public discourse and ultimately good public policy.

During the interim, I served on two task forces: the Joint Task Force on Administration and Delivery of Services to Children and Families and the Joint Task Force on Offender Programs, Sentencing and Supervision. Although these task forces looked at different issues, the goals were similar: assessing complex service systems and improving state services for the benefit of the entire state, while saving costs to the taxpayer. My commitment to these difficult issues remains steadfast. More information about these two task forces can be found later in this newsletter, as well as my other legislative priorities for 2007.

With an interim filled with meetings with stakeholders, working with the task forces and various other legislative commitments, I unintentionally neglected my legislative blog during the interim. But I want to continue using this new media to keep in touch during the long session (Jan. 8 to April 22). Please visit my blog on my Senate web page: <http://www.sdc.wa.gov/regala.htm>. Your input is greatly appreciated.

*Please don't hesitate to contact my office if we can be of assistance to you. As always, it is an honor and privilege serving you.
Sincerely yours,*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debbie Regala". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Debbie Regala, State Senator 27th Legislative District



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Committees & Leadership:

- Majority Whip
- Human Services & Corrections, Vice Chair
- Ways & Means
- Rules
- Water, Energy & Telecommunications

Other Appointments:

- Legislative Ethics Board
- Joint Legislative Audit & Review Committee

The Joint Task Force on Offender Programs, Sentencing and Supervision

Every year, approximately 9,000 inmates are released from Washington prisons. Many released inmates are ill-equipped to return to the outside world. The inability to access mental health or substance abuse treatment services, the lack of gainful employment, tenuous or no contact with family, and homelessness are some of the reasons why more than 40 percent of offenders return to prison. Recidivism — the number of people returning to prison due to new convictions or violations of release conditions — increases incarceration costs and reduces public safety often creating more crime victims.

Aiming to reduce the state's recidivism rates, the 2006 Legislature created the Joint Legislative Task Force on Offender Programs, Sentencing and Supervision (Senate Bill 6308). The task force included Secretary of the Department of Corrections (DOC) Harold Clarke, legislators, correctional and law enforcement officers, county officials, former offenders, victims rights advocates, attorneys, and representatives of community organizations who work with former offenders. Once assembled, the task force created subcommittees, focusing on a "reparative re-entry

approach" and examining areas that would offer offenders the best chances for success: education and employment; transitional programs and state/county coordination; eliminating legal barriers; and community partnerships.

Inmates usually come to prison with a multitude of challenges: mental health issues, substance abuse, illiteracy and lack of job skills, to name a few. Recommendations from the task force include assessing an inmate's employment history and risk factors at the time an inmate enters the correctional facility and developing an action plan to address these factors. If left untreated, this reduces the chances for future success. Another proposal more closely links early release of non-violent offenders with an offender's successful completion of his or her action plan.

Fostering partnerships is also an important component of the task force's goals. A former offender's successful transition back into the community is dependent on continuity from state, county, and city agencies and community organizations. Community groups can provide a former offender with continuing education, treatment opportunities, family mentoring and the support of the faith community.



Providing inmates with the best chances for a successful transition benefits everyone, especially since 97 percent of offenders are released back to the community.

I realize that not all prisoners want to change their criminal behavior. After all, I'm a realist. However, for those who do, fundamental changes need to occur. Offenders need a chance to address their deficits and access tools that will help them become productive members of our community. A holistic offender re-entry approach gives Washington a chance to make the most comprehensive changes to our corrections system in more than 30 years.



Budget Outlook 2007

Despite Washington's cooling housing market, higher than expected revenues continue to add money to the state General Fund. The 2005-2007 biennium leaves \$1.8 billion in the general fund and in other reserve accounts, such as the Emergency Reserve Fund and Education Construction Fund. Unanticipated revenues would be used for improving health care coverage, implementing the recommendations from Washington Learns, (the governor's advisory committee on K-12 and higher education systems) and cleaning up Puget Sound and Hood Canal to name a few.

Numerous constituents and community organizations have asked me to consider advocating for funding to support proven or promising programs that will benefit our community. I have also been asked to help advocate for funding for various important capital projects designed to improve our community. My service on the Ways and Means Committee will be beneficial in this regard as the 2007-2009 biennial budget is developed and the various requests are analyzed for their cost effective outcomes and real benefits to the citizens of our state.

Helping Washington's vulnerable children and families

The Children's Administration (CA), under the auspices of the state's Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), provides support services for at-risk families and oversees the child welfare system, including child placement, adoption and foster care. CA works with community organizations, government agencies, tribes, regional service networks and other service providers to determine client needs, which are unique to each child and family.

In 2000, the federal government mandated a review of each state's child welfare programs including how services are delivered and the outcomes for children and families. While our state did fairly well in the areas of foster parent recruitment and training, placing children with relatives and emphasizing kinship, the review panel determined that Washington needed improvement in areas such as mental health, child safety, and providing educational and vocational services.

Also during this time, the state was working to settle a lawsuit filed against DSHS by a former foster child for the practice of moving children from placement to placement. After a mediated settlement was reached in 2004, DSHS began to develop recommendations for comprehensive child welfare reform. Public scrutiny brought about by the lawsuit and settlement, as well as several highly publicized child welfare cases, prompted the 2005 Legislature to pass a bill creating a joint task force to evaluate CA's administrative structure and its ability to deliver positive outcomes to children and families.

The task force's main objective boiled down to this: Should the Children's Administration continue operating under DSHS or should it become a separate agency? Would an administrative change improve its efficiency and provide better services for the children and families of Washington?



The task force on which I served sought answers to these questions during the past two years.

While I agree with the other task force members that CA needs to focus more on the well-being of each and every child, I do not believe creat-

ing a new government agency is the best use of resources.

There are a number of programs and services within DSHS, such as mental health and developmental disabilities, both critical components of the child welfare system. Creating a new

administrative structure could hinder future coordination efforts and collaborative partnerships in the delivery of these services. Funding is also a concern.

For these and other reasons, I'm not sold on the idea of creating a new agency. Redefining the agency's culture, revamping prevention strategies, revising child welfare policies and most importantly, providing adequate funding would do more to address the needs of children and families.

PBDEs

PBDE (polybrominated diphenyl ether) is a flame retardant found in everyday items such as furniture, automobiles and television sets. This chemical additive is blended into foam and plastic during the manufacturing process. Although it reduces a product's flammability, scientists have found PBDEs in the food chain, in human hair and blood, and in breast milk. (Although studies have found PBDEs in breast milk, health experts still recommend breast feeding for infants.)

Food, indoor air, household dust and direct oral contact with plastic such as toys are the four main routes of PBDE exposure. Once PBDEs make their way into the bodies of living organisms such as humans and animals, they attach to fat tissue, steadily building up over a lifetime. The body does not pass or process PBDEs, and this is cause for concern. Based on lab tests on rodents, PBDEs have been shown to harm the neurological systems of developing organisms.

Last year, I sponsored Senate Bill 5515, which would have banned the sale, manufacturing and distribution of products containing PBDEs, with certain exceptions. Passage of this bill would have given the state Department of Ecology the authority to grant certain exceptions for its use and to eliminate products containing PBDEs.

When it comes to the environment, Washington has always set the gold standard. I have re-introduced the bill this session (Senate Bill 5034) and strengthened it by adding an advisory committee of firefighters to ensure that before PBDE-containing products are banned, any products with alternative flame retardants will have comparable flame retardant qualities.

To find additional information about PBDEs, please visit the state's Department of Ecology Web site: http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/pbt/pbde/PBDE_faq.htm

Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement

Last session, I sponsored a bill (Senate Bill 6594) that would have included Washington in a voluntary agreement with 21 other states to streamline the collection of sales and use taxes from remote sellers. The bill garnered support from Washington's business community and cities and counties around the state.

This legislation represents fairness issue for Washington businesses. For example, when you buy a product at the mall, you are charged a state sales tax. However, if you purchase the same item from a catalog or through the Internet, you rarely pay the sales or use tax. Under Washington law, consumers are required to pay these taxes but there has been no mechanism to collect them.

As more and more people shop through these remote sellers, this

inequity hurts the state's economy and creates a competitive disadvantage for Washington's brick and mortar retailers. Under the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement, businesses agree to collect the tax and remit it back to those states that are part of the agreement. Businesses benefit from the streamlined or nationally uniform administration of tax collections and are given amnesty for any previous failure to collect these taxes. Being a full member in the agreement will also give our state a voice in any tweaks to the agreement in the future. I have re-introduced this legislation as SB 5089 at the request of Governor Chris Gregoire. Our goals are to help Washington businesses remain competitive and keep our economy strong.



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